Classmate an ex-offender?
Most youths don’t mind

Undergrads accept ex-inmates, if their crime not too serious

By MAZUIN KRAMIS

MISS Ng May San sits next to a former criminal in class – but she is not upset or scared.

The Singapore Management University (SMU) students are project mates and work together often.

“I had always thought that ex-convicts are covered with tattoos and have loud personalities. My classmate, however, is the total opposite,” said Miss Ng, 21.

Until she read a newspaper report about him, she did not know he had been in jail for five years for selling and consuming drugs.

The 31-year-old ex-offender is doing well in school and holds a prominent scholarship.

Being in class with him has made Miss Ng more aware of the Yellow Ribbon Project, which seeks to bring ex-offenders back into mainstream society.

The social sciences student was even inspired to choose a module which entailed her teaching inmates how to prepare themselves to get back into society.

SMU has been known to admit ex-offenders, though a university spokesman declined to reveal figures.

He said: “When we interview students, we look at their academic grades, achievements, character and aspirations.

“Our ex-offender students have adjusted very well and have convinced us they have the potential to be transformed into outstanding student leaders willing to give back to society.”

When they are given a place at SMU, the ex-offenders are treated just like any other student because the university prefers to “let them grow on their own and not single them out”.

Most youths Youthlink spoke to said they do not mind having an ex-offender in class or at work – as long as the crime committed was not too serious.

Market researcher Julie Tan, 21, said: “I’m fine with an ex-offender in class or at work. I don’t see the thing that would colour my perception,” he said.

“Tell or not to tell – that was the dilemma Mr Yusof (not his real name) had to face when he went job hunting after his release from prison last year.

“I always ask myself whether or not to tell the truth. Personally, I don’t see the point in telling employers I have a record – because if anything goes wrong, I will be the first to be blamed,” said the 21-year-old.

Without disclosing his past, Mr Yusof managed to get a job in sales a year ago and has kept it since then.

He told Youthlink there has been a perceptible improvement in the public’s attitude towards people like him.

But more can be done.

“Yes, more companies now are opening their doors to ex-offenders, but are they offering the same salaries as they do to others? I don’t think so. In fact, some offer salaries which are half the market rate.”

Another ex-offender, 18-year-old Miss Teo (not her real name), claims that finding permanent employment has been difficult.

“Whenever they see the snake tattoo on my calves, they don’t want to keep me in their employ,” said the single mother of a one-year-old girl.

Miss Teo, who spent 15 months in a girls’ home for rioting, makes do with the money she earns from temporary jobs, such as as a sales promoter.

She now hopes to get a permanent job in retail.

If Mr Yusof is right about the perception towards ex-offenders changing, Miss Teo may have her wish fulfilled soon.

The writer graduated from Ngee Ann Polytechnic in 2004.